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ABSTRACT

This study examined sources of conflict in international teaching assistant (ITA) training programs for graduate students from abroad using a survey of 10 research and doctoral institutions. The survey sought to characterize some sources of conflict between ITA trainers and their constituencies as perceived by ITA trainers. Responses indicated three common conflict settings: between an ITA and the ITA trainer/administrator; between a faculty mentor/advisor and the ITA; and between a department head and the ITA trainer/administrator. Analysis of survey responses indicated that: (1) most responding institutions had no appeals process for an ITA in a conflict situation; (2) most ITA trainers reported that some ITAs had experienced exploitation by faculty; and (3) 70 percent of respondents had found themselves in the position of being external advocates for ITAs on occasion. A common misunderstanding identified by survey respondents is that facility with English indicates a facility with pedagogical skills. The paper concludes with a discussion of approaches to conflict resolution, negotiation styles, strategies for mutual gain, and the importance of consistent and rational policies. (Contains 18 references.) (DB)

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Background

As a national phenomenon, the increasing enrollment of international students in selected disciplines and the decreasing numbers of native born Americans seeking matriculation into graduate programs have caused concern in some higher education circles. Graduate programs threatened with possible subscription shortages have filled available slots with international students rather than downsizing (Constantinides & Byrd, 1986; Heller 1986; Lambert 1993). In 1960, foreign students were awarded 1,976 Ph.D.s compared to 1989 in which 8,195 Ph.D.s were granted to foreign students (Lambert, 1993). In the 1995-96 academic year, foreign student enrollment totaled 453,787, 42% of whom were graduate students (Open Doors, 1995-96). In 1994-95, a total of 397,629 master's degrees were conferred, 48,727 (12%) to non-resident aliens. In that same year, a total of 44, 446 doctorates were awarded in the United States out of which 11,130 doctorates (25%) were awarded to non-resident aliens (Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac Issue, 1997). A larger pool of qualified international graduate students (and a decline in domestic applicants) led to more international teaching assistant appointments (Committee on Science, Engineering and Public Policy, 1995). More ITA appointments led to the creation of programs specifically designed to prepare ITAs for the American classroom. This task was given, for the most part, to individuals with an applied linguistics background (Althen, 1991). The universities' need for qualified ITAs resulted in a sub-discipline of teacher development: ITA training or development. As issues which arose in ITA program administration became more prominent (Bailey et al, 1984; Smith et al, 1992), conflicts became more apparent.

Conflicts arise when there is serious disagreement or argument about something important. In order to identify sources of conflict in international teaching assistant training programs, 10 research and doctoral institutions were surveyed in the summer of 1996.

Views of Conflict

Rubin (1993) describes *conflict resolution* as a state of attitude change which effectively brings an end to the conflict in question, while in contrast, *conflict settlement* is an overt conflict which comes to an end even though underlying issues may not have been settled. Both of these terms reflect behavioral changes, some attitudinal and others procedural. Within a higher education setting, conflict resolution implies that some or all of the parties have managed an attitudinal change towards the problem and thereby resolved it; whereas, conflict settlement indicates that a solution has been imposed by an authority without actual changes in attitudes and so inevitable dissatisfaction with the process often results. Conflicts arise from a number of sources but the overriding cause is the importance that individuals place upon the disagreement. For ITA trainers who may find conflict in their work situation, awareness of distinctions between conflict resolution and settlement, could lead to avoidance or at least minimization of conflict.

Methodology

In an effort to identify sources of conflicts in ITA programs, a 16 item survey was emailed to ITA trainers/administrators at 13 universities. The thirteen institutions were selected from the 48 programs described in Bauer & Tanner (1994). Responses were obtained from 10 institutions all of which were rated as research or doctoral institutions under the Carnegie Classification.[1] The survey sought to characterize some sources of conflict between ITA trainers and their constituencies as perceived by ITA trainers. While the programs differed in size and manner of administration, all had individuals who were identified as ITA trainers and/or administrators. What follows is a review of the survey questions and answers and a summary.

[1] Bowling Green, Cornell, Drexel, Oklahoma State, Purdue, Univ. of Michigan, UT Austin, U of IL. Urbana/Champaign, Michigan State, New Mexico State.

Survey Questions and Answers

1) Who has authority in determining an ITA's eligibility for employment?

The majority (6) of the ITA trainers had partial authority. This was interpreted to mean that ITA trainers made recommendations regarding the ITAs' oral communication skills. If they were deemed deficient, then the employing departments were directed to assign the ITAs to non-instructional responsibilities (e.g. grading, lab set ups). Several trainers pointed out that their universities had a commitment to provide the ITAs with support whether or not they were cleared for teaching assignments. The remaining ITA trainers (4) or their units had sole responsibility for the decision.

2) How supportive is the dean of the ITA evaluations completed by the ITA trainer or unit?

ITA trainers generally received support for their decisions from their graduate deans. In 7 out of the 10 ITA programs surveyed, the dean supported all of the trainers decisions while two stated that 'nearly all' decisions were supported by the dean. In one case, agreement was sought and obtained from the ITA's academic department.

3) Are foreign language ITAs exempted from assessment interviews?

Six institutions required that foreign language ITAs be screened whereas 4 did not.

4) Should foreign language ITAs be exempt from assessment screenings?

All ITA trainers surveyed felt that foreign language ITAs should **not** be exempted from the screening process. (For example, a Spanish speaking TA doing graduate work in Spanish literature and teaching Spanish.)

5) Who decides upon ITA eligibility?

The majority (80%) of the institutions had teams make the decision. At two universities, individuals in the ITA program were responsible for eligibility decisions.

6) How are decisions made?

Half of the institutions surveyed had evaluative teams that made decisions based upon discussion and consensus. Two used a rating system and three had individuals rather than teams make the decision.

7) Does your institution have an appeal process for a disgruntled ITA?

The majority (6) replied no. Two responded that there were rare or limited appeals and two institutions did have appeal options.

8) Do ITAs come to you for advice or help in problem solving?

Only one trainer had never been approached by an ITA for help. Six responded 'sometimes' , two 'seldom' and one 'often', although trainers found that if they had taught the ITAs in a course, then the ITAs tended to seek their assistance.

9) Do you function as an external (non-departmental) advocate for ITAs in your program?

70% of the ITA trainers sometimes undertook to advocate ITA whereas the remainder were never or almost never found themselves in that position.

10) If you do advocate for a particular ITA, does this result in hostility or resentment from department heads?

For the trainers who responded positively to the previous question, the majority felt little or no hostility from department heads, although some (2) did perceive minor resentment.

11) Do you have direct contact with department heads over ITA assessment?

Most trainers had direct contact with department heads. Two trainers dealt with some department heads on occasion. One trainer never dealt with department heads at all.

12) If you are aware of ethical maltreatment of ITAs, what do you do?

Responses varied. Some trainers merely counseled the ITA; however, the majority of trainers notified the ITA of grievance procedures at some stage. Several trainers notified the graduate dean while two notified both the graduate dean and the department. Two trainers felt that this question did not apply to their ITAs.

13) Identify any ethical violations of which you have been aware.

80% of the respondents cited several examples of ethical violations. Two trainers felt that this questions did not apply or were unaware of any violations. The major violation seemed to be work overloads. ITAs were usually granted 20 hour assistantships but worked 30 - 40 hours per week on a regular basis. This was particularly true of ITAs assigned marking (grading) tasks. In several instances, ITAs were given full responsibility for a course rather than merely assisting. This was particularly egregious when an ITA was just beginning his/her initial term at an institution. Three institutions gave examples of international faculty exploiting their fellow nationals (e.g. Chinese professors exploiting Chinese ITAs).

14) Are you secure in your position as an ITA trainer/developer?

The majority of the respondents (80%) were secure in their employment. One held an annual contract and another was on soft money but felt relatively secure in the position.

15) Is your salary in keeping with junior faculty at your institution?

Responses varied. Three respondents held senior faculty positions and the remainder were junior faculty and paid accordingly.

16) I should be paid as an administrator and/or as faculty.

The majority of the trainers felt that both administrative and faculty responsibilities applied to the position and remuneration should be in keeping with the duties. However, two ITA trainers/administrators responded that they received administrative salaries.

Discussion

On the basis of these responses, three common sources of conflict were identified:

An ITA and the ITA trainer/administrator

A faculty mentor(advisor) and the ITA

A department head and the ITA trainer/administrator

An ITA and the ITA trainer/administrator

The majority of the responding institutions had no appeals process for an ITA. In one case, an appeal was possible but only at the behest of the department head/chair. "*During the appeal, the faculty member gets some insight into the criteria and the procedures and leaves quite supportive of the process and results.*" [2] This amounts to what is known as conflict resolution; that is, an attitudinal change took place. However, the attitudinal change presumably occurred in the faculty member and not the ITA.

A lack of a formal appeal process for an ITA who has not passed a screening and/or a course leaves the ITA no recourse but to contact the ITA trainer directly to seek satisfaction. For ITA programs which use teams to make the decisions, refuge can be sought in the statement, "This was a team decision based upon the consensus of trained evaluators." For the ITA developer whose sole opinion is the basis of the judgment, difficulties might arise.

ITA candidates who have failed the screening may find their offers of institutional support jeopardized. They would then, quite understandably approach the ITA trainer for verification, re-testing or clemency.

Judging from the response, the ITA and the ITA trainer/administrator did not appear to be as significant a source of conflict as conflicts which arose between ITA trainer/administrators and faculty or department heads.

A faculty mentor(advisor) and the ITA

The majority of ITA trainers reported that some of their ITAs had experienced exploitation by faculty. Many ITA trainers reported that ITAs sought their advice or help regarding stressful situations. The predominant concern dealt with ITAs being overburdened with work. Several trainers mentioned instances whereupon international faculty took advantage or teaching assistants who were fellow nationals. Other trainers were aware of complaints from ITAs who were expected to work 30 - 40 hours for a 20 hour TA position. Others reported professors who required TAs to perform personal

[2] Quote from a respondent. Survey participants were assured anonymity.

services (e.g., serve at a wedding, make airport trips, mind children). Indeed, a recent article in the Chronicle of Higher Education (Leatherman, July 18, 1997) discussed this very issue. Accusations of plagiarism were also noted in the Leatherman article.

Commentary

ITA trainers can 'preach' the moral view that any type of exploitation is unacceptable. There are two problems. Firstly, some TAs want to be exploited and do personal services for their professors as they feel that this may cement the relationship between the advisor and the student (ibid). Others are fearful of complaining as this might shatter the tenuous relationship between student and teacher. Cultural differences enter into this realm as in other countries (China, for example), the graduate student is expected to give gifts to the professor prior to the professor accepting him/her as a student. Brian Linson, a former doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania, claims that doing personal favors for a professor, grants more access. "Graduate students are kind of mad and desperate. Being a slave, being used by a professor, is better than people who are being ignored. It's like a mark of success"(Leatherman, 1997: p A11).

The issue is conflict of interest. ITA trainers can discuss at length about the abuses and the rights of the ITAs in their training programs; however, it is the ITA who must decide what route to follow: to tolerate the situation and get the degree or to complain and thereby jeopardize either the degree or the needed post graduation reference letters. The ITA developers who were aware of maltreatment of ITAs reported the violations to department heads and/or graduate deans and also informed the ITAs of grievance procedures. Nevertheless, unless an ITA files a formal complaint, there is not much an administrator can do to correct the problem. Within a university bureaucracy, the grievance process must function on the basis of formal complaints by the aggrieved, not hearsay. And so, ITAs have no real alternative other than to be stoic or foolhardy.

A department head and the ITA trainer/administrator

Some ITA trainers did find themselves in the position of being external advocates for ITAs on occasion. The survey did not seek reasons for this phenomenon rather it merely established that this was the case for 70% of the respondents. One could speculate as to why ITA trainers become personally involved with ITAs by looking at where most ITA trainer/administrators are housed. The majority of the ITA trainers used in this survey were housed in English (ESL or linguistics) programs. Two were housed under an ITA program designation which was noted as a separate entity and the others were housed in ITA programs within a center for teaching excellence. These compare with the ITA program descriptions supplied by Bauer and Tanner (1994), the majority (61%) of the ITA trainers were housed in ESL programs. 28% were housed in teaching development centers or graduate programs with specific ITA program designations and the remaining 11% were attached to international program activities or had ITA programs as a separate unit.

Commentary

This implies that most individuals involved in ITA programs have originated from an English as a second language (ESL) background. ESL professionals by and large tend to have a much more 'touchy-feely' relationship with their students. Some of this may be attributed to the teaching method. The communicative approach (or some interpretation of it) to language teaching has gained wide acceptance in modern ESL methodology. This approach, which has focused attention on the sociocultural context of language use, encourages, "focusing on learners' knowledge of the functions of language, and on their ability to select appropriate kinds of language for use in specific situations" (Crystal, 1987: 374). The level of comfort enjoyed by ESL learners with their instructors is quite high (Braine, 1996). It would not, therefore, be a major leap, to assume that the teaching style employed by ITA trainers who were formerly ESL professionals would form relatively strong bonds with their students.

ITA programs contain strong cross-cultural or intercultural components (Bauer & Tanner, 1994) whereupon the ITA trainers are in essence acting as cultural interpreters for the ITAs. Again, ITA trainers, in their function as cross-cultural trainers, are more likely to be sympathetic and empathetic to ITA personal circumstances and difficulties encountered upon arrival in the USA. Althen (1991) states that, "People who teach in ITA programs are not necessarily prepared to teach about culture. Most were probably hired because they were versed in linguistics, pedagogy, or a particular discipline ...."(p. 353). Nevertheless, he does state that ITA trainers must be willing to address a "wide range of culture-related issues...." (p 353). ITA trainers, for the most part, accept this responsibility as evidenced by descriptions of ITA program content. Most ITA trainers would probably agree that, "The burden of adaptation in cross-cultural learning situations should be primarily on the teachers" (Hofstede, 1986: 301).

Obstacles to Resolution

There are a number of reasons why conflicts such as the ones described are difficult. Genuine misinformation may be the culprit. New department heads or staff may not be aware of all of the rules and procedures of the university. An ITA screening requirement is only one of many details about which academic administrators must be cognizant. The requirement may be interpreted differently by interested parties. The issues may not be clear as department heads, ITA academic coordinators and graduate students will probably have varying agendas.

Another repeated misunderstanding among both faculty and those seeking teaching assistantships is that a facility with English will necessarily indicate a facility with pedagogical skills. (This is blatantly untrue as we have all had native English speaking professors who, although fluent in the English language, were certainly not versed in pedagogy.) Adding to the confusion of 'language skills versus teaching ability' is the fact that ITA screenings are by and large conducted by ESL individuals or units. Therefore, academic departments understandably confuse the purpose of the screening.

Approaches to Conflict Resolution

An authoritative edict from the graduate dean (i.e., conflict settlement) is certainly one simplistic way of settling conflict; however, in an academic setting this is not an ideal solution. Another method is avoidance. For example, a department head might request ITA screening exemption for his/her academic department using as a justification discipline expertise as the criteria for hiring teaching assistants (e.g., an ITA from Spain teaching Spanish). Lastly, a standard approach in conflict resolution is to call a meeting and have all parties discuss issues together. It is at such meetings that negotiation and resolution can take place but the attitudes of those at the table can affect the satisfaction levels of the participants. Settlement of the conflict may involve compromises that some (or all) of the parties are unwilling to make. Moreover, personal or emotive issues might arise as a result of statements made in haste or out of pique (Sander, 1993). These must be dealt with through discussion of the issues and awareness of the concerns of all interested parties. Often evaluative decisions need to be made at particularly busy occasions, i.e., the beginning of a term, when parties prefer not to set aside meeting time but to deal by phone.

Negotiation Styles

Williams (1993) discusses effective negotiating styles but points out that 'effectiveness' is a construct. An individual's perception of effective negotiation may well be colored by the levels of satisfaction i.e., outcome of the negotiation. The person who secures the greatest advantage by surrendering the least may feel triumphant. For example, an insistent or desperate department head may be excessively aggressive in trying to obtain eligibility for an ITA and perceive the ITA trainer as an obstacle.

There are strategies that ITA trainers can use to offset this behavior. Some ITA trainers have directed their attention towards publicizing their programs by circulating brochures informing both faculty and students about ITA courses. Others address faculty meetings (departmental or college wide) in an effort to 'explain' to faculty the rationale behind ITA

development. Many video tape screenings and make copies available to faculty who question a decision.

Mutual Gain

Strategies for mutual gain can only be established if the parties understand what the issues are and if all can comprehend (and agree upon) 'the big picture'. By referring to the institutional mission and then to individual academic departmental goals, ITA trainers, faculty and administrators can voice their perspectives. Through open communication channels, plans can be made which will help satisfy concerns. If faculty (ITA advisors) and department heads can concede that the better prepared an ITA is for an assistantship, the more likely the ITA will be able to balance the workloads between an assistantship and degree completion. In return, the ITA trainer can work closely with the departments to accommodate individual needs.

Outcomes assessment evaluation methodology has required academic departments to state their desired objectives and to evaluate the rate of achievement within those confines. Academic departments functioning within the outcomes assessment parameters should include objectives to be met by the undergraduates and their teaching assistants. These, in turn, should be incorporated into the ITA program curriculum.

Resolution:

Consistent and rational policies are necessary so that people know what is expected of them. At many universities, ITA screening is mandatory, yet problems do arise. The perspectives of the stakeholders affected by the ITA requirement (ITAs, department heads, graduate students, undergraduates, parents, ITA academic coordinator) must be taken into account. However, an overriding stipulation must be agreement as to the mission of the institution and how the academic departments help support that mission.

One rather Draconian method, possibly imposed by a graduate dean, might be to require a representative of the department to attend the screenings. Departments failing to participate would forfeit assistantships and/or the right to complain or request exemptions.

This would ensure faculty involvement and reinforcement of the seriousness with which the university pursues quality teaching. It would not, however, contribute much to a sense of collegiality. Conversely, it might reinforce the view that interference in departmental ITA assignments by the ITA trainer is undesirable.

Undisclosed Conflict

For universities, the 'problem' of ITA employment, particularly of non-native English speakers, has been partially resolved through screening and training; however, other underlying issues have not. These include the discriminatory nature of the requirement, since American or native English speakers are exempted (Brown et al 1991). This adds substance to the fallacious assumption that if you can talk, you can teach. Another issue is whether universities ostensibly committed to excellence in teaching are earnest if the majority of the instructors are neither screened nor trained (Boyer, 1991; Wilkening, 1991). These are additional sources of conflict in ITA matters that need discussion.

Conclusion

Universities which require screening of all potential TAs, not just ITAs, should have fewer conflicts resulting from claims of ignorance about screening dates or confusion over who needs to be screened. The more common and widespread an event, the more people know about it. Moreover, clearly stated and widely known criteria are particularly important so as to deter accusations of arbitrariness. Screening of all TAs would make it clear that the university is serious about undergraduate teaching and that good teaching involves more than just language facility. Until such comprehensive screening becomes standard procedure, however, the ITA coordinator will need to expect conflict to arise over ITA screening and to remain sufficiently flexible to seek resolutions which are in the best interest of the program and the parties involved.

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